

**“Prophecy, Mortal, Prophecy to the Breath”**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-18**  
**Pentecost Sunday**

**Acts 2:1-18**

<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

<sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

<sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>11</sup>...In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

<sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “People of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup>“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

<sup>3</sup>He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

I answered, “O LORD God, you know.”

<sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the LORD God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

<sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

<sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the LORD God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

<sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say,

‘Our bones are dried up,  
and our hope is lost;  
we are cut off completely.’

<sup>12</sup>Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the LORD God:

I am going to open your graves,  
and bring you up from your graves, O my people;  
and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

<sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

<sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you,  
and you shall live,  
and I will place you on your own soil;  
then you shall know that I, the LORD,  
have spoken and will act,”  
says the LORD.

### The Sermon

*I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.*

*And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, O Israel.*

*And your young shall see visions.*

*And your old shall dream dreams.*

God is pouring out the Holy Spirit on you. Can you feel it?

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women—*

*In those days, I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.*

It is a radical pronouncement: God is going to pour out the Holy Spirit on everyone. “All flesh” will have the gift of prophecy: to speak God’s word to a starving world.

And, God willing, they will use it.

I was a very young man, just out of college, spending a year in England as a Mission Volunteer for the PC(USA) and having been assigned to an Anglican church. I was assisting one of the local priests in bringing communion to one of the geriatric hospitals in town.

Before the communion service he and I would separate and go to the different halls and rooms and beds and invite people to come to the service.

At one point, I saw a woman who was serving as a nurse to an old guy, and he was just berating her. I don’t remember if he was using any racial slurs per se, but his meaning was clear. She had beautiful, dark skin and he was airing his appalling rant at her at least partly based on that fact alone.

The whole time, two things lodge mercilessly in my memory.

One, she continued whatever she was doing to care for him, visibly hurt but choosing to disregard his hateful ignorance.

And two, I did, and said, nothing. No word of judgement, no word of compassion.

Maybe I didn't want to complicate things further; maybe I was just dumbstruck and out of my element. But I am eternally haunted by my complicity.

A short time later, at the communion table we had set up in the main room, all had been served, and it was time for the priest and me to serve each other.

He was a venerable old man; he had been on the mission field, and had given a lifetime of selfless service.

I held the wafer and the cup for him, and quietly, almost silently, he pounded his chest liturgically three times, and each time, he said, ritually, "I am not worthy. I am not worthy. I am not worthy."

And I thought then as I feel now: no, sir, you are most worthy. I have seen unworthiness.

Thank God that God does not wait until we are worthy to bestow the gifts of the Spirit.

Now if only we the people of God will use them, as I didn't do that day.

God is pouring out the Holy Spirit on you. Can you feel it?

I ask for real. Because sometimes—maybe a lot of the time—you *can't* feel it, or you don't feel it. Or at least *I* don't.

His name was *Ezekiel*, "The strength of God" or "God strengthens." He lived at the time when the Babylonians conquered and dominated the part of the world that included Jerusalem in Judah, and many of the best and brightest were sent into exile.

He came from a family of priests, born into a world where the people wore the burden of defeat on their faces and carried it in their bones.

Their defeat was not just philosophical angst. It was economic; it was brutal; it was heartlessly legal. “Sorry, Judahites, but we won the war, and wars have consequences.”

The priests who held power in Jerusalem at that time had a specific interpretation of the events that had led to the defeat and scattering of God’s people, Israel.<sup>i</sup> The explanation was that Israel had deliberately failed to follow God’s covenant, and they were now reaping the reward of their faithlessness.

So the nation itself, and the people within it, were now bound to the fate of the defeated—a joyless, helpless, powerless Sheol on earth, where nothing seems to count for anything, and existence has had life’s marrow of truth and beauty sucked out of its dry bones.

That was the world into which a priest and prophet named *God Strengthens* was called to speak.

God called Ezekiel to go and join the settlement of exiles living at Tel-abib, “not modern Tel-Aviv but a settlement of exiles...not far from the Chebar canal,”<sup>ii</sup> which may have been a canal that was being dug for Nebuchadnezzar by the more or less forced labor of the Jews.<sup>iii</sup>

When God sent Ezekiel there, God said,

“Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel,  
to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me;  
they’re impudent and stubborn.

Do not be afraid of them,  
and do not be afraid of their words,  
though briars and thorns surround you  
and you live among scorpions;

do not be afraid of their words,  
and do not be dismayed at their looks,  
for they are a rebellious house.

“You shall speak my words to them,  
whether they hear or refuse to hear;  
for they are a rebellious house.

“But hear what I say to you:  
Don’t be rebellious like that rebellious house;  
open your mouth and eat what I give you.”

And, said Ezekiel, I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me,  
and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me;  
it had writing on the front and on the back,  
and written on it were words  
of lamentation and mourning and woe.

And he said to me:

“O mortal, eat what is offered to you;  
eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.”

So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.  
He said to me, Mortal,  
eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.

Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.

He said, “Mortal, go to the house of Israel  
and speak my words to them.

“For you are not sent  
to a people of obscure speech and difficult language,  
but to the house of Israel—  
not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language,

whose words you cannot understand.

“Surely, if I sent you to them, they would listen to you.

“But the house of Israel will not listen to you,  
for they are not willing to listen to me;  
because all the house of Israel  
have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

“But see, I have made your face hard against their faces,  
and your forehead hard against their foreheads.”<sup>iv</sup>

God is pouring out the Holy Spirit on you. Can you feel it?

God set Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley full of very dry bones,  
and said, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Ezekiel answered, “O LORD God, you know.”

And God said, “Prophecy to the bones,  
and say that the LORD God says:  
I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.  
Sinews and flesh and skin and breath,  
and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

And Ezekiel prophesied,  
and the bones came together,  
and there were sinews, and flesh, and skin on them;  
but there was no breath in them.

And God said to the mortal:  
“Prophecy to the breath, *you* prophesy, mortal,  
and say to the breath: Thus says the LORD God:  
Come from the four winds,  
and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

And the *ruach*, the breath of God, the Spirit, came into them—  
the same wind that swept over the formless void  
when God created the heavens and the earth  
and darkness was upon the face of the deep,  
and the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters.<sup>v</sup>

And the breath came into them, and they lived,  
and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Can you feel God's insistent presence in the world?

It's an honest question—the only kind of question we have time for any more.

It's an honest question because there are times when it seems like God is silent, maybe even absent. And God has said to the mortal Ezekiel:

When the valleys are dry and silent,  
don't wait for me to prophesy to you.  
Don't wait for me to reassure you that all will be well.  
Don't wait for me to say once again  
that Jesus Christ died for your sins  
and lives again for your life.

Don't wait for the Spirit to reaffirm your permission to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the world. Go do it.

Don't wait for the Spirit to restate your ability to be a spigot of the Water of Life in the world.

If you can't feel the Holy Spirit prophesying to you,  
mortals, *you* prophesy to the Spirit, and say:  
God has told me that you are here—  
so come and breathe life into this broken and dying world again.

And in the power of the Holy Spirit,

When you see unkindness, meet it with love.

When you see injustice, meet it with goodness—  
never *self*-righteousness; always *God's* righteousness.

Be hard headed about what is right and true and just and loving and merciful.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were all sitting together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house.

Tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and rested on each of them.

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

They could now communicate with everyone around them, and what they could communicate was the awesome love of God, as demonstrated conclusively in Jesus, the Messiah,

who loved and taught and fed and healed and blessed and gave,

and whose new commandment to all of his disciples was:

Love one another, just as I have loved you.

Tend my lambs, feed my sheep, tend my sheep.

“Prophesy to the breath! Prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:

Thus says the Lord GOD:

Come from the four winds, O breath,

and breathe upon these dry bones,  
that they may live.”

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<sup>i</sup> New Oxford Annotated Bible 5th Edition (2018), 1175 [see under “Authorship,” esp. in regard to the Zadokites and the “Holiness School.”]

<sup>ii</sup> NOAB, 1180, n. 3:15.

<sup>iii</sup> I found this suggestion online and it seems worthy of much greater research than I have done here.

<sup>iv</sup> Ezekiel 2:3-3:8

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 1:1-2